

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and, by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is*, even *that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*.

—Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*

So the questions arise in art criticism: what is the artist commenting on, what does he say, and how does he say it? These are, I believe, spurious questions. He is not saying anything ... he is *showing*.

—Suzanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*

Imagine browsing through a second-hand store full of knick-knacks, and happening upon a thing that somehow seizes your gaze, not by matching some template of anything you knew you were looking for, but rather by triggering a more instinctive reaction to significant form. As if in a wash of ambient noise your attention were snagged by a hint of speech, faint and unintelligible, yet all the more arresting for the contingency of its occurrence. *Wait, is that... what is that?*

Walking through museum galleries or flipping through exhibition catalogs you may note many admirable pieces but only occasionally find one that really "speaks to" you. It can be quite difficult to articulate what makes such works so special, but they seem set apart from those that don't transcend; they are possessed of some distinctive aura. Suzanne Langer refers to an "'unreality' of art that tinges even perfectly real objects like pots, textiles and temples", which, "among the husky substantial realities of the natural world, is a strange guest."¹ Extolling the still-life paintings of bottles and vases by Giorgio Morandi, Peter Dormer writes that one could "infer from the work some spiritual quality"² and argues that Morandi was able to endow his canvases thus by virtue of his exceptional perceptual sensitivity and hard-won craft skills. Is the aura of strong art really something created, infused by a skilled artist into erstwhile ordinary matter? If so what *is* it, and how does it reach out to us so?

In a lovely short essay from the late 1990s we find Gwyn Hanssen Pigott musing, "I am sure that the forms of the most common, everyday utensils can evoke so much that is inexpressible in any other language about humanness."³ Langer develops related ideas about art as a kind of material syntax whose "purpose is to objectify the life of feeling."⁴ In her theory, artistic forms "are symbols for the articulation of feeling, and convey the elusive and yet familiar pattern of sentience."⁵ When experiencing strong art we perceive such articulation intuitively. It commands our attention. For Langer, the essence of plastic art resides not so much in the elaboration of materials as in the inception of the symbolic force that a profound arrangement (form) can carry. Like Dormer, she associates the making of expressive form with craft: "Technique is the means to the creation of expressive form, the symbol of sentience; the art process is the application of some human skill to this essential purpose."⁶ As to how we should understand the "essential purpose" of art, Langer writes, "A work of art is intrinsically expressive; it is designed to abstract and present forms for perception – forms of life and feeling, activity, suffering, selfhood – whereby we conceive these realities, which otherwise we can but blindly undergo."⁷ "Life is incoherent unless we give it form"⁸ (through such activities as the making of art); and "A work of art, or anything that affects us as art does, may truly be said

to 'do something to us' ... It gives us forms of imagination and forms of feeling, inseparably; that is to say, it clarifies and organizes intuition itself."⁹

In these quotes we see how Langer asserts a cognitive function for art, engaging feeling and intuition as complements to analysis and reason. She is joined in this by Nelson Goodman, who addresses the nature of art (as well as its relations with science) on the basis of his extended studies on the kinematics of symbolization. Through art, Goodman believes that our emotional faculties can be leveraged in attaining insights on nature and the human condition: "Emotion in aesthetic experience is a means of discerning what properties a work has and expresses ... emotions function cognitively not as separate items but in conjunction with one another and with other means of knowing."¹⁰ Goodman and Langer both write about "symbolic revelation" as a kind of cognitive epiphany that works of art may bring about in us. Goodman emphasizes how art plays a parallel role to science and scholarly inquiry in advancing the sophistication and reach of our worldviews: "Fiction operates ... in much the same way as nonfiction. Cervantes and Bosch and Goya, no less than Boswell and Newton and Darwin, take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable – that is, *re-cognizable* – ways."¹¹ Here Goodman locates the cognitive force of artistic, scientific and scholarly works alike in their capacities to provoke revelatory deconstructions and re-makings of understanding. Elsewhere he pinpoints *metaphor* as a key mechanism underlying such provocations.

Before considering Goodman's analysis of metaphor let us recall some important points on representation in art, as made for example by Dormer in discussing a hypothetical example of suspect artistic practice: "Almost any object or part of an object can be put into an assemblage and be described as representing anything that assembler cares to say it represents. What is missing is a congruity between the form and the representation ... It is arguable that much contemporary art, especially installation art, works at this level – the words provide the content and the artefacts are merely pegs."¹² Dormer goes on to contrast this with the deeper, genuinely expressive work of Morandi as mentioned above. In Goodman's terms, "Labeling seems to be free in a way that sampling is not. I can let anything denote red things, but I cannot let anything that is not red be a sample of redness."¹³ For Goodman, works of art must comprise samples of, and not just contrived labels for, what a maker wants them to express (reveal). This is a critical point for his theory of artistic symbols, which organically encompasses abstract works that do not necessarily depict or otherwise denote any identifiable external entities.

Imagine a somber Rothko, of which we might say, "The picture is literally gray but only metaphorically sad."¹⁴ According to Goodman, metaphor typically "is a matter of teaching an old word new tricks", setting up "an affair between a predicate with a past and an object that yields while protesting."¹⁵ An effective metaphor captures relationships that feel resonant once called out, yet previously sat latent and unrecognized because they run beyond or across conventional paradigmatic schema. In this sense, taking in a novel metaphor may enable us to discern analogous new relations in yet further surprising contexts – in Goodman's terms, we learn something projectible [sic] when we appreciate a new metaphor. Though we are accustomed to thinking of metaphor as a kind of linguistic construct, Goodman considerably broadens the concept: "A Mondrian design is right if projectible to a pattern effective in seeing a world."¹⁶ In his discussion of the cognitive function of art, Goodman merges this broadened sense of metaphor with that of sampling as expression: "Serving as samples of, and thereby

focusing attention upon, certain ... forms, colors, feelings, such works induce reorganization of our accustomed world in accordance with these features, thus dividing and combining erstwhile relevant kinds, adding and subtracting, effecting new discriminations and integrations, reordering priorities."¹⁷ We parse the world differently after taking in what Abakanowicz, Basquiat, or Wei Ligang have to show us.

Bringing our focus back to ceramics, can we build on the above ideas to develop a critical approach that highlights cognitive functions of ceramic presence and form? In doing so we might aim to counterbalance more interpretive critical trends decried in the epigraph, which have been noted with concern by Dormer as well: "With the transfer of art from a craft-based to a theory-based discipline, the objects of contemporary art stand as cyphers for theory: instead of being an expression, the contemporary art object is a representation of an idea."¹⁸ Our critical approach could consider the multisensory grammar of ceramic form, examining the affective impacts of arrangements of visual, tactile, and haptic features. Ceramic surfaces can achieve almost synesthetic effects – we can feel some glazes just by looking at them; towards what expressive ends can such sampling be used? We might analyze the structure of tropes that connect the cognitive and utilitarian functions of ceramic works such as bowls, bottles and jars. Goodman explains how his definition of metaphor assimilates literary tropes: "Among metaphors some involve transfer of a schema between disjoint realms. In personification, labels are transferred from persons to things; in synecdoche, between a realm of wholes or classes and a realm of their proper parts or subclasses; in antonomasia between things and their properties or labels. But not for all metaphors are the two realms disjoint ... In hyperbole, for instance, an ordered schema is in effect displaced downward..."¹⁹ Are there multisensory cognitive-functional tropes characteristic of the ceramic medium? We might think here about the ashen tones and the felt weight and depth of a cavernous Reitz tea bowl, grave with feelings of burdensome obligation and emptiness. How might a studied appreciation of the glaze plumes of traditional *chousen karatsu* influence how we think about interface, infiltration and encounter? Reading Langer through her contemporaries in the field of art history (e.g., Francastel²⁰), what can we say about the plastic space of Nazca pottery, with its wrap-around monstrosities laden with ritual symbolism? Can we insightfully relate such formal aspects to mythic force? How do the more vitreous slips and bolder lineation of Nazca pots contribute to their quite different *gestalt* as compared to Attic white ground lekythoi?

By building such a portfolio of critical inquiry we may help to more clearly situate ceramics (and indeed craft in general) relative to the broad spectrum of essentially experimental activities that human discovery and expression comprise – a spectrum that incorporates aspects of art, science, and cultural production as overlapping and inseparable domains. Ceramic making leverages distinctive materials and processes; what singular formal relations do they enable? Strong pots project a unique aura that shines forth from even the most rarified ranks of the world's greatest museums. Their "content" is not generally their source of power.

¹ Langer, Suzanne K. *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1973, p. 50.

² Dormer, Peter. *The Art of the Maker: Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design*. Thames and Hudson Limited, 1994, p. 35.

³ Hanssen Pigott, Gwyn. "Truth in Form: Pulled-Back Simplicity." *Studio Potter* 26 (1997): 5-8.

⁴ Langer, p. 374.

⁵ Langer, p. 52.

⁶ Langer, p. 39.

⁷ Langer, p. 59.

⁸ Langer, p. 400.

⁹ Langer, p. 397.

¹⁰ Goodman, Nelson. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Hackett, 1976, pp. 248-9.

¹¹ Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett, 1978, p. 104.

¹² Dormer, p. 34.

¹³ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 58.

¹⁴ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 68.

¹⁵ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 137.

¹⁷ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 105.

¹⁸ Dormer, p. 33.

¹⁹ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, p. 81.

²⁰ Francastel, Pierre. "The Destruction of a Plastic Space." In Wylie Sypher, ed., *Art History: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*. Vintage Books, 1963.